

## **COMMUNITY VIOLENCE: THE SOLUTION IS IN THE CAUSE**

The gun violence in Wilmington and northern New Castle County has gotten everybody's attention, and that is usually what happens when problems go unaddressed. They grow until the pain cannot be ignored. It's no different than our body experiencing pain or developing a fever so we go to the doctor or ER. The gun violence is not the problem; it is the symptom or the tip of the iceberg. As long as we only focus on the symptom, we will make little meaningful progress. The symptom does need to be addressed and so does the underlying problem; which needs to be identified and treated. To state that we are not going to "hug-a-thug" and we are going to lock'em up for a long time with no consideration of the cause or of what happens after they are sentenced, may make us feel good in the moment, but is myopic, dangerous and irresponsible. This vengeance approach of inflicting pain on offenders has been proven beyond any question not to work and, in fact make matters worse. The few offenders who have the resilience to respond well to the pain might have done so even without the pain. The vast majority do not respond well and become angrier, more marginalized, alienated and de-socialized, and 97% of them will be coming out to be our neighbors and walk our streets. Shaming someone who feels shame simply reinforces their shame; and shame can motivate people to violent and destructive behavior.

Our approach reminds me of the story of the man walking along a river and comes upon a group of people who ask him to help. He walks over to them and sees that they are pulling babies out of the river. This is their future generation and they must save them. It is an emergency. So the man starts helping and saving babies. In a few minutes a wise man walks by and notices what is happening. He walks on and the people plead with him to join in their noble effort. He responds that he is going up stream to see why they are falling into the river in the first place. This is what we need to do in Wilmington; unite and go up stream and deal with what is causing all this violence.

So, if the gun violence is the symptom, what is the cause; poverty, racism, drugs, unemployment, lack of education? All are factors, but the cause goes deeper. It's disconnection; disconnection from our community, from others, from ourselves. A study done by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention is very enlightening. It showed that there is a direct correlation between childhood trauma and poverty, addiction, mental health illness, physical illness, behavior problems [in school and life] and criminal behavior. Childhood trauma dramatically impacts the size, development, structure and function of the brain [[www.acestoohigh.com](http://www.acestoohigh.com)]. The implications of this discovery are profound. Problem behaviors and conditions may be the result of changes in the brain and not just choice or environmental factors. For example, addiction is no longer treated as a problem of self-control – to drink, gamble, look at pornography, etc. or not – but as a chronic brain disorder, the cause of which is previous trauma. So, treating the unhealed trauma must be part of the overall treatment plan, otherwise you are only treating the symptom. The same is true for other mental health issues, behavior problems and criminal behavior. The Delaware Department of Substance Abuse and Mental Health [DSAMH] reports that more than 85% of its clients have experienced significant childhood trauma. Now, does this justify violent or criminal behavior – absolutely not, but it does indicate that trauma healing must be part of the solution.

The most significant impact of trauma is the shattering of the belief that the world is safe and that important people in the child's life can be depended upon for protection and/or safety. The result is the child will protect itself by withdrawing and, at least emotionally, disconnect from others, which leads to the child disconnecting from him/herself. This isolation is where problems arise; escape into drugs,

gambling, high risk behaviors, fantasy or magical thinking, gangs, etc. It may be the only recourse a child has. So, approaching these conditions as natural responses to traumatic stress might be more helpful than calling them disorders and labeling our children, often for the rest of their lives.

Some youth are so disconnected, they feel life is not worth living and engage in adrenalin rush/high risk behaviors feeling if they get killed, it's OK. A young man told me, "What does it matter, I'll be dead before I'm 22." One way to counter this feeling of hopelessness is to help them connect with themselves and others, which gives them something to live for – hope that the future has something better for them than the present. One girl put it this way, "For years I mucked around in the trauma of my past and felt stuck in the (often dark) reality of life. It wasn't until I locked in on dreams that I had previously denied that I found my way to life. I understand why death can seem like a good option but I have found that life lived on purpose is way more fun. Having 'thy eye be single' on a good dream is one of the surest ways out of the nightmare of current reality. I hope all of our sons and daughters find their way to healing, to dreaming and to creating a new reality." She became connected to herself, her dreams, to others and to her community. Reconnection as prevention is part of the solution.

In Delaware, the Department of Substance Abuse and Mental Health and the Department of Correction realize the relationship between trauma and disconnection, and violence, and have been working on being Trauma Informed. We must extend this approach into our communities if we are going to reduce the violence. Two communities have been doing this: Walla Walla, Washington and Tarpon Springs, Florida. In Walla Walla, the alternative high school has reduced its suspension rate by 85%. When a student is sent to the Principal's office, instead of being shamed, the Principal asks what's going on in the student's life and they talk about resources and ways the student can handle the stresses. The Principal establishes a connection with the student showing that he cares. Then, and only then, do they talk about the consequences for the student's behavior. All the staff in the high school has been trained in "Trauma Informed Care." [<http://acestoohigh.com/2012/04/23/>]

Tarpon Springs has developed a well-organized formal effort involving law enforcement, schools, business, nonprofits, government agencies and the legislature. An example of their new approach was when a young man burned down his uncle's pawn and gun shop, then went home, killed his uncle, with whom he lived, his uncle's girlfriend, his grandmother and then himself. Rather than going into attack mode on the young man, people asked other questions that focused on the likelihood of his traumatic history, on why he was living with his uncle instead of his parents, and how the community had not noticed his growing dysfunction. People were asking 'Where did we miss the boat?' and 'What happened to him?' instead of 'What's wrong with him?'" They were looking for answers to help them prevent it happening again and not attacking the young man. [[www.peace4tarpon.org](http://www.peace4tarpon.org)]

Massachusetts has also been working on being trauma informed and has produced a useful document on educating traumatized children [[http://www.massadvocates.org/documents/HTCL\\_9-09.pdf](http://www.massadvocates.org/documents/HTCL_9-09.pdf)].

If we are to be successful at addressing gun violence in Wilmington, we must embark on a campaign of education about the effects of trauma and ways to avoid re-traumatizing those with unhealed trauma. We need a holistic approach; prevention and treatment involving our schools, parents, law enforcement, government agencies, the news media and, yes, our legislators. We have to find a different way; one promoting connection rather than disconnection. People do violence to themselves and to others when they feel disconnected. So, a key part of the solution has to be helping those who feel disconnected to feel connected. Some will say that this is not our responsibility. Well, it had better

be or we are going to continue to get what we got. There may be many programs that could help, but I know of one that has been working in Delaware for the past twenty-two years; the Alternatives to Violence Project [AVP], which also has programs in most states and in over 40 countries worldwide. AVP has been providing life changing workshops primarily in the prisons, but also for government agencies, school staff and the community. It has received numerous national awards and is one of the 2012 Governor's Outstanding Volunteer Program award winners.

What AVP primarily accomplishes is to help people connect with themselves and with others and gives them the skills and experience to transform their attitudes. When given the opportunity and the skills, people will do what is right. One of the valuable qualities of AVP is that it can be easily taught so can be replicated in other communities and settings. Thus, people from the community teach their peers, resulting in a high degree of credibility within the community. AVP type programs, which are relatively easy and inexpensive to set up, could be one of the prevention tools we use with our youth and young adults, and not just in the inner city, e.g., with youth at risk for suicide elsewhere in Delaware. [A leading national expert on youth suicide stated that you prevent suicide through connection.]

In order to effectively address the gun violence problem, we must first focus on our feeling of hopelessness, apathy and ignorance of the underlying cause. We must get informed and involved, and not leave it up to the clergy and police. Either we are part of the solution or we are part of the problem. Let's stop the rhetoric about being "tough" on crime and start thinking about being "smart" on crime.

I challenge the Mayor, Wilmington City Council, New Castle Council and the Criminal Justice Council to all work together toward making Wilmington [and Delaware] Trauma Informed. It's time.

John A. Shuford  
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